Breeding words

Alan Beale

How often one hears that the formation of hybrid words is wrong! Our poor hybrids are declared 'monstrosities' of the language, as if they were like mythical hybrid monsters, too dangerous for ordinary folk and terrible adversaries for the heroic grammarian or teacher to slay. In his standard reference book, *Modern English Usage,* first published in 1926, Fowler thought "that word making ... should be done by those who know how to do it; others should neither attempt it for themselves, nor assist the deplorable activities of amateurs by giving currency to fresh coinages before there has been time to test them." His final phrase calls up visions of government language laboratories busily testing new words before they are released to the public. Maybe we should imagine them issuing warnings: 'television can seriously damage your linguistic health.' Fowler's rage merits such flippancy, but his hostility towards hybrids is still entrenched in many minds. Robert Burchfield in his admirable book *The English Language (O.V.P.* 1985) is less categorical, but still thinks 'good taste' in such matters 'a prize worth seeking.' Here the approach has mellowed and is openly subjective, but unfortunately this more liberal attitude is not yet universal. A recent review of Adrian Spooner's *Lingo* blamed him for not disapproving of 'bastard derivations, using Greek and Latin elements indiscriminately' in word-building exercises. For 'surely such should be discouraged.' Should they?

Hybrid words are not new

History and the unscrupulous inventiveness of the human mind are against the purists. Hybrids have been with us a long time and are frequently used without recognition. How many readers notice that 'chestnut' is a hybrid? The tree was originally the *chesten* (or similar spelling), a word which came via French from the Latin *castanea.* To this the English word nut became attached, at first signifying the fruit and later the tree itself. Nutmeg *(notemuge* in Chaucer) is a similar case: *muge* is the old French form of the Latin *muscus* (musk). In this paragraph too, 'attach' would normally pass by with its origin unquestioned, but it is an early French combination of the Latin *ad* (to) and a Celtic or Germanic word (related to stake or tack). French is not the only language to provide us with ready-made hybrids. Tyrannicide comes from the Latin *tyrannicida,* a compound of Greek *(tyrannos,* tyrant) and Latin *(caedere,* to kill). The Dutch *enterloper* has become interloper in English, making its hybrid origins clearer: Latin *inter* and Dutch *looper* (a runner). The Italian *piedestallo,* a compound of *piede* (< L. *pes, pedem;* a foot*) and *stallo* (< Germanic stall; a

* * Derivations in this article have generally been simplified for clarity. Abbreviations: G. = German, Gk . = Greek, L. = Latin, < = derived from, E. = English

stable or stall), travelled via French or Spanish to give us pedestal. Its ultimate hybrid origins led Walter Skeat in his *Etymological Dictionary* (1882) to declare, 'footstall is a better word.' Over a century later it is clear that Skeat's preference has had no success in competing against pedestal, his despised 'clumsy hybrid'. Let us return to native shores for a short list of hybrids which we have been using for a long time.

chapman (a merchant, now only used in names) L. *caupo* (merchant) + E. man
nobleman L. *nobilis* + E. man
gentleman L. *gentilis* (of the same clan) + E. man
manservant E. man+ L. *servus* (slave)
beefeater F. *boeuf(* <L. *bos , bovem ;* ox) + E. eat
commonwealth L. *communis* + E. *weal* (prosperity, welfare)
napkin L. *mappa* (cloth) + E. diminutive suffix – kin
because E. prefix be- (by) + L. *causa* (cause)
bedevil E. prefix be- (forming a verb) + Gk. *diabolos* (devil)
priesthood Gk. *presbyteros* (elder) + E. suffix –hood (indicating state)
tombstone Gk. *tymbos* (tomb) + E. stone

Naturalisation

As loan words gain currency in their new language, they became naturalised, and although their origins may not be forgotten, they are treated as native words when forming compounds. We may have examples in the Latin *tyrannicida* or *aegisonus* (aegis-sounding), a coinage of the poet Valerius Flaccus. The Greek words *tyrannos* and *aigis,* for which Latin had no native equivalents, were presumably felt to have become Latin words. The adoption by a new language, followed by combination with native words is particularly common in the use of affixes in English. A few examples will have to suffice:

suffixes
With L. -bilis (-ble) on E. stems:
bearable, readable, gullible

With Gk. -istes (-ist) on L. stems:
scientist, linguist, artist, classicist, purist (!)

prefixes
With L. dis– on E. stems:
disown, disbelieve, dislike

The addition of such affixes to words of different origin is not usually thought objectionable. we even attach them to otherwise non-hybrid compounds, as when we add L. –osus (-ous)

to polygamy (Gk. *poly;* much /many + *gamos*; marriage) to form polygamous. Unlike a person, a word cannot apply for citizenship or carry a passport, so that naturalisation of words has to be a less precise process. Are we, for example, to regard the Greek words *tele* (far, distant) and *hyper* (beyond, over, excessive) as naturalised English prefixes? After they became familiar in regular formations like telephone or hypertrophy, it is not surprising that they are increasingly used in hybrid combinations:

hyperactive (+ L. *agere;* to do)
hypersensitive (+ L. *sentire;* to feel)
hypertension (+ L. *tendere;* to stretch)
telecommunications (+ L. *communicare;* to share, consult)
teleprinter (+ L. *imprimere;* to press on, imprint)
telemessage (+ L. *mittere;* to send)

Modern Times

In recent times the rapid changes in society and the development of science and technology have led to an explosion in hybrid formations as Latin and Greek have been ransacked for suitable new vocabulary. Many of these hybrid coinages pass into regular use without objection. Here are a few examples:

automobile	Gk. *autos;* self + L. *mobilis;* movable
monocle	Gk. *monos;* single + L. *oculus;* eye
homosexual	Gk. *homos;* like + L. *sexus*
heterosexual	Gk. *heteros;* other + L. *sexus*
bicycle	L. *bis;* 2 times + Gk. *kyklos;* circle, wheel
neoclassical	Gk. *neos;* new + L. *classicus;* of the highest class
prehistory	L. *prae;* before + Gk. *historia* (naturalised in L.)
petrol	Gk. *petra;* rock (naturalised in L.) + L. *oleum;* oil
criminology	L. *crimen;* charge, crime + Gk. *logos;* word, study
sociology	L. *socius;* comrade, partner + Gk. *logos*
philoprogenitive	Gk. *philos;* friend + L. *progignere;* to beget
monorail	Gk. *monos;* + E. rail (< L. *regula*; staff, rod)
vasectomy	L. *vas;* vessel + Gk. *ektome;* a cutting out

Time to stop for the old joke: there's a *vas deferens* between having children and not having them.

Occasionally hybrids can be useful in making distinctions: so with metres (Gk. *metron;* measure, naturalised as *metrum* in L.), combinations with Greek prefixes are multiples, those with Latin are divisions (though Danish is used in some of the lower divisions):

kilometre	Gk. *chilioi*; 1,000
centimetre	L. *centum*; 100
millimetre	L. *mille*; 1,000

English words too are often combined with Latin or Greek elements. So we find:

railway	L. *regula* + E. way
microchip	Gk. *mikros*; small + E. chip
breathalyser	E. breath + Gk. *(an)alysis*; resolution
speedometer	E. speed + Gk. *metron*
autocue	Gk. *autos* + E. cue
typewriter	Gk. *tupos*; blow, impression + E. write

Trade names and abbreviations have also played their part in bringing hybrids into our language:

dictaphone	L. *dictare*; to declare, dictate + *phone*; voice
vaseline	G. *wasser;* water + Gk. *elaion;* oil + L. suffix –inus (–ine)
helicopter/heliport	Gk. *helix, helik–*; twisted, rolling + *pteron*; wing + L. *portus;* harbour
telex	a combination of teleprinter (see above) + exchange: L. *ex;* out of, from + late L. *cambiare;* to exchange, barter

Proper nouns have not been excluded from hybridization. Constantinople we inherited from the Romans who had added the Gk. polis (city) to the emperor's name. So more recently were formed Daguerrotype and chauvinist. Sometimes we find an odd word like refusenik, its English element exported, combined with a Russian element, and the resulting hybrid reimported.

Faced with the plethora of hybrids in our language, are we still to insist that their formation is wrong? Instead of regarding them like mythical monsters, perhaps we should remember what Thomas Bewick said of the mule (a cross between a horse and an ass): it 'is found very serviceable in carrying burthens, particularly in mountainous and stony places where horses are not so sure-footed.' Hybrid words can be equally serviceable, whether we prefer them for the sake of euphony or clarity. Possible replacements such as vasexcision or smallchip, like Walter Skeat's footstall, are not likely to succeed! Let us conclude by saying that only the purblind would partake of censorship to bowdlerize the glossary of our language by excising noisome hybrids instead of regarding them as heirlooms or as a paramilitary force in the forefront of the battle for new terminology.

Now it's your turn

That last sentence contains ten hybrid words of various types. Can you identify them and give their derivations? Answers on inside of back cover.

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